

Technology moves telephone along



TELEPHONE OPERATORS in the early days wore headsets that allowed customers to hear them better.
(Photo courtesy of GTE)

Telephones have long been accepted as common place in most households, but when first introduced in the Camas-Washougal area, they were considered something of a marvel.

Patented by Alexander Graham Bell in 1876, telephones were first installed in the Northwest in 1888. Although an exact date isn't known, it is presumed that telephones were installed in the Camas-Washougal area around the turn of the century.

Jane Lukov, an operator in Camas and Washougal from 1935-'51, saw much of the early days of telephone operation. Lukov's mother was also an operator and often took her daughter to work.

"I cut my teeth on the telephone switchboard," Lukov said. "It was kind of fun to watch her work the new-found system."

At that time the telephone company was owned by a local man, C.W. Vail. Vail's son, still in high school, installed Lukov's first phone and told her mother about a temporary job as an operator. The job was only to last three days, but turned into a career that spanned nearly four decades.

Lukov followed in her mother's footsteps and operated one of the first switchboard systems. Lukov

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GTE making plans to make system top-notch

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said they were fun to operate but required a little bit of dexterity. "They didn't have power so you had to provide it manually by turning a crank with one hand and dialing the number with the other," she said.

Although she was no longer working for the phone system, Lukov remembers when the old switchboard system was replaced by direct dial phones. Lukov said that the changeover was considered a drastic one for the operators and also the town's people.

"It was very traumatic for the town because you couldn't call the operator and find out where the firemen, police or the local doctor was," Lukov said. "They used to call into the operator and let her know they were going to be out and where they could be reached."

The local telephone system changed hands several times over the years. The Vails sold their family business to Charles Hall and Earl Gates who owned controlling interest in the Coos and Curry Telephone Company in 1928. The same year they merged with several other local phone services and became West Coast Telephone Company.

West Coast was the predecessor to General Telephone and Electric which now services the Camas-Washougal district. GTE announced the merger in 1966 and it became official in 1967.

Camas and Washougal has grown over the years, and so to has the phone service, and technology behind it. Bob Wayt, public affairs manager for GTE Northwest in Beaverton, Ore., said that Camas and Washougal will not be left behind in new technological advancements. In 1989 GTE plans to modernize the phone system in the two communities with the conversion to computerized, digital technology.

"The digital switching will provide much improved technology," Wayt said. "You're going from dated technology to the most advanced system in the world."

Installation of new fiber optic cable, which transmits signals over hair-thin glass strands at the speed of light, is also planned for 1989, Wayt said. The fibers offer transmission of data and video signals as well as voice messages.

"Every call between Camas and Washougal will be transmitted over fiber optic cables," he said. "We are again talking about the most advanced system."



Opening of the Camas-Washougal Telephone office, owned by Jorgen and Frances Henriksen. (From left to right) Jorgen Henriksen, Anna LaLond, Dick Huycke and Frances Henriksen.

Ever since Grandpa Jorgen and Uncle Henrik opened the Henriksen Brothers' General Merchandise Store back at the turn of the century, we Henriksens have proudly served you, the people of East Clark County. I hope to serve you in the next century!

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